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Mythologizing Identity and History: A Look at the Celtic Past of Galicia

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Abstract

Following in the tradition of nineteenth-century Galician historians, who claimed to establish links between Galicia and other alleged Celtic nations, the *Xeración Nós* maintained the legacy of Celtic ancestry by importing and translating Irish literature. The most important translation for affirming the alleged Celtic identity of *Xeración Nós* was a selection of chapters from the Irish text *Leabhar Gabhála* (*Book of Invasions*). This article will provide a general overview of the historical works which established Galicia's Celtic ancestry. It will also consider why intellectuals chose to translate an Irish myth. By examining these issues, I will demonstrate how this text was influential in the *Xeración Nós*' agenda of enhancing the Galician language as well as establishing an alleged Celtic identity and a filial relationship with the Irish.

Keywords

Celticism, *Rexurdimento*, Vicetto, Murguía, *Xeración Nós*, Risco, Otero Pedrayo, *Leabhar Gabhála*

Introduction

"Today, the immortal star of Celticism rises again to light up the world...will it shine then for the Ireland of the South?"

Vicente Risco¹

In Galicia, located in the northwestern corner of Spain, the men and women of the *Rexurdimento* (the Revival), the *Irmandades da Fala* (the Brotherhoods of the Language), and the *Xeración Nós* (the Generation "Us"), believed that Galician history had been neglected for too long and had been overshadowed by the Castilian Spanish one. To remedy this, these Galician intellectuals ransacked their past and transformed it so that they could reconstruct a Galician nation. This reconstruction was based on their discovery of Galicia's alleged Celtic

origins. However, unlike Ireland, which was the only Celtic nation to successfully preserve its ancient manuscripts and other scholarly materials, Galicia had no such well-known antiquities. Consequently, Galician intellectuals felt that they possessed an impoverished literature that desperately needed its own myths and legends. To recover its history as well as its ancient literature, Galicia gradually focused its attention on its alleged ancestors - the Celts - and the land where they ultimately settled - Ireland. As a consequence of this growing interest, nineteenth-century scholars tried to establish links between Galicia and other alleged Celtic nations, while twentieth-century nationalists sought to maintain the legacy of their supposed Celtic ancestry by importing and translating Irish literature which, for them, evoked the Celtic race's spirit.

In this article, I will discuss the two historians mainly responsible for establishing Galicia's alleged Celtic identity. I will then explain how their works influenced the literary projects of the following generations and how they were pivotal to Galicia's early twentieth-century nationalist movement. After I consider the contribution of historians to (re)writing Galicia's supposed Celtic history, I will briefly examine the role of translation in Galicia. This discussion will then allow me to explore why twentieth-century intellectuals decided on the translation of selected chapters from the Irish myth, *Leabhar Gabhála*, or the *Book of Invasions*, into Galician and analyse why Galician intellectuals felt the need to incorporate this work into their language. Overall, I will demonstrate how these translations were influential in the reconstruction of Galicia's supposed Celtic identity and establishing new relationships with other peripheral Atlantic nations, especially with Ireland.

Ransacking the Past and (Re)Writing History -- The New Versions of Galician History According to Vicetto and Murguía

To understand why the Galicians were interested in translating *Leabhar Gabhála* as well as other Irish works,² it is necessary to consider the role that Celticism played within this northwestern part of the Iberian Peninsula. James Macpherson's alleged translation of the *Poems of Ossian* in 1765 instigated a fascination with the history and literature of the Celts and eventually influenced the Romantic movement throughout Europe. Whereas poets and novelists usually promoted Romantic ideals in various European cultural and literary movements, historians, in the case of Galicia, also espoused them. In fact, when reading Galician history written in the nineteenth century, it is not surprising to discover overt romanticisation of

prehistoric accounts.

In 1838 José Verea y Aguiar introduced the concept of Celticism in his *Historia de Galicia*. About thirty years later, two historians emerged as significant figures in supporting Verea Aguiar's thesis that the Celts were the ancestors of the Galicians. These men, Benito Vicetto (1824-1878) and Manuel Murguía (1833-1923), romanticised Galician historical accounts in order to affirm their nationalist ideologies and to glorify their past. Their goals were simple: to re-introduce a forgotten era of Galicia's prehistory and allocate prestige to the Celts' presence in Galicia. Essentially, they wanted to (re)create a Golden Age for their homeland. In fact, this quest for self-knowledge was a reaction against the history and tradition imposed by the central authority represented by Madrid. As a result, the theme of Celtic ancestry became a prominent thread in their writings, which emphasised the Galicians' ethnic divergence from the Castilian Spanish. The efforts of the Galician intellectuals were no different from those of other eighteenth and nineteenth-century scholars and novelists in other Celtic nations, like Brittany, Scotland, and Wales. As Simon James points out, Paul-Yves Pezron in Brittany, Macpherson and Sir Walter Scott in Scotland, and Edward Lhuyd in Wales used their supposed Celticness to establish their own cultural differences from France and England, respectively (1999: 44-50). Enchanted by the Celtic past and eager to appropriate it as their own under any circumstances, the Galician intelligentsia, just like the Breton, Scottish, and Welsh intelligentsia, began the process of what Homi Bhabha has called "writing the nation" (Bhabha 1990: 297) (Figure 1).

Vicetto's *Historia de Galicia*, which spans seven volumes published between 1865 and 1873, dedicates a few chapter sections to the presence of the Celts in Galicia. Vicetto formulates a connection between race and nation but his discussion of the Celts is not as well detailed or researched as that of his contemporary Murguía. According to historians Justo Beramendi and Xosé Manoel Núñez Seixas, the historiographical value of Vicetto's works is "almost null". Nevertheless, both recognise his importance in the promotion of Celticism in Galicia (Beramendi and Núñez Seixas 1996: 30-31). Basically, Vicetto's work assists in perpetuating romantic notions of identity, particularly the belief in a race and a national character both specific to Galicia, and in contributing to the formation of a unique Galician identity (Beramendi and Núñez Seixas 1996: 31).

In depicting race as the cornerstone of the Galician nation, Vicetto draws on historical sources and refers to various geographers and historians in linking the Celts with Galicia.



Figure 1. Here we have one of the earliest images of the Torre de Hércules (the Tower of Hercules). It was constructed by the Romans in the second century BC (Photo: Alfredo Erias).

Vicetto's intentions are twofold: first to prove that the Celts settled in Galicia and second to demonstrate that these same Celts inhabited Ireland. As Vicetto narrates Galician prehistory, he often identifies the Celts as "our natives" so as to accentuate the relationship between Galicia and the Celtic peoples. This is an early example of the Galician historiographical tendency, in particular that of some twentieth-century intellectuals belonging to the group known as the *Xeración Nós*, to distinguish itself from Castilian Spain and to assimilate with the Celts, especially the Irish.

To defend his viewpoint, Vicetto depends on Spanish historians and geographers and their citations of Irish scholars. He refers to José Verea y Aguiar, a Galician historiographer, who indicated that Irish and Scottish historians believed that their ancestors originally came from Spain (Vicetto 1986: 178). As further support, the historian also cites Pliny, who links the Celtic peoples to Galicia and even affirms that the Celts' origins are in Galicia, "en tierra de célticos", or the Occidental lands (Vicetto 1986: 111). Another source is the monograph *Ibernia Phoenicea* by historian Joaquín Lorenzo Villanueva.³ Villanueva offers two brief accounts, one from Giolla Caemháin, who translated Nennius's *Historia Brittonum*,⁴ and the other from Dermot O'Connor's

translation of Geoffrey Keating's Irish text on the history of Ireland, which includes a version of *Leabhar Gabhála*. In his synopsis of Caemháin's account, Villanueva states that Breoghan founded the city of Brigantia from which his own descendants later emigrated for Ireland and that he gave his name to Brigantia, now known as A Coruña (Vicetto 1986: 175). Villanueva adds that Keating concurs with Caemháin and suggests that Breoghan erected the lighthouse in A Coruña where Breoghan's descendants first saw Ireland (Vicetto 1986: 175). By quoting Villanueva, Vicetto not only shows that the Irish scholars acknowledge that their Celtic origins lie in Galicia, but also seeks to demonstrate that the Celts left a legacy to the Galicians.

Throughout Vicetto's discussion, he attempts to substantiate the emigration of Celtic peoples from Galicia to Ireland. He does so by referring to the Spanish geographer Juan Bautista Carrasco and his work, *Geografía general de España*, published in 1861. According to Carrasco, Ireland's settlers departed from Spain, specifically from Cape Finisterre on the coast of Galicia (Vicetto 1986: 173). Carrasco thus supports both Pliny's and Villanueva's assertion that there were Celts in Galicia. Furthermore Carrasco is much more specific regarding the Celts' departure point, upholding Villanueva's opinion that it was Galicia (Figures 2a, b). With respect to the migration of Celts from Galicia to Ireland, Vicetto lauds it as "one of our greatest glories" (Vicetto 1986: 173). His insistent emphasis upon this glory for Galicia as well as Ireland not only illustrates Vicetto's pride in Galicia's Celtic ancestry and history, but also indicates that Vicetto envisions that period as a Golden Age, an era from which Galicia could reclaim its national spirit. More than fifty years later, the *Xeración Nós* would augment Vicetto's scholarship via their studies in archaeology, prehistory, and literature so as to promote a more romantic image of Galicia's past.



Figures 2a, b. According to some historical accounts, the Celts sailed to Ireland after departing from the Fisterra coastline, which is shown here (Photos: TURGALICIA).

According to Ramón Villares, Vicetto's work is "very romantic and somewhat imaginative" (Villares 1990: 200). His history is a product of the influence of the Celtic phenomenon inspired equally by Macpherson and Romanticism. Despite the fact that Vicetto does not specifically name or refer to the Irish text *Leabhar Gabhála*, his citations of other scholars, especially Villanueva, allude to characters and places central to the plot. As I will demonstrate in the next section, Murguía fills the void by discussing Irish legends, specifically *Leabhar Gabhála*, in more detail. Later, the *Xeración Nós* would confirm Vicetto's findings by translating *Leabhar Gabhála*.

Murguía's two ambitious historical works, *Historia de Galicia* and *Galicia*, published in 1865 and 1888 respectively, elaborate upon Galicia's alleged Celtic origins and popular folklore and myths. His purpose is to show that the Galicians not only possess their own history, but also that they are more civilised than other peoples of the Iberian Peninsula (Villares 1990: 200). He bases this conviction on specific factors, including geographic location, customs, language and, most importantly, race. In addition, he champions Celticism as a principal factor of Galician national identity. According to Anthony Smith, each ethnic group possesses "a distinctive complex of myths, memories and symbols (or a 'myth-symbol complex') with peculiar claims about the group's origins and lines of descent". The combination of these myths and claims thus informs the group's "*mythomoteur*", which Smith identifies as the "constitutive political myth". It therefore is this *mythomoteur* that "endow[s] the movement with shape and direction" (Smith 1986: 58). For Murguía, it is Celticism that stands at the centre of Galicia's own "myth-symbol complex", upholds his unique vision of Galicia's ancestry and past, and defines the Galician *mythomoteur*. In this respect, Murguía, more than Vicetto, has contributed to the construction of the concept of Galicia as a national entity different from the Spanish nation perceived as largely based upon Castilian culture (Beramendi and Núñez Seixas 1996: 35). By intertwining the key factors of history and race, Murguía asserts that the history of the "Nazón de Breogán", or the "Nation of Breoghan", is, before anything else, the history of the Celts (Máiz 1997: 194). As a result, the translation of chapters from *Leabhar Gabhála* acts as an affirmation of Murguía's history. His historical hypotheses serve as the foundation on which the *Xeración Nós* will continue to build their nationalist ideology.

Establishing the Celts as the distinctive race of Galicia is foremost in Murguía's chronicling of prehistory as much as in his creating the Galician nation. Throughout his books,

references to the Celtic presence within Galicia abound. He claims that the Celts are "our ancestors" (Murguía 1982: 31) and seeks support from past scholars in this conclusion, explaining that ancient geographers and historians, like Strabo, Pomponius Mela and Pliny, believed that the Celts had settled in Galicia (Murguía 1980: 454). In addressing the question of Galicia's Celtic ancestry, Murguía argues that it is not a modern hypothesis supported only by historical studies, but that studies on archaeology as well as linguistics further support his thesis (Murguía 1980: 477). For Murguía, the Celts represent the "most ancient people" of Europe (Murguía 1980: 477). By suggesting this, he attributes to them a special place in history in general, and in Galician history in particular. As a result of this, the historian claims that the Celts are Galicia's "only real ancestors" (Murguía 1982: 22). Like Vicetto, Murguía is adamant regarding the Celtic element in Galicians' ancestry so as to identify the Galicians with the Celts and to differentiate them from the remainder of the Iberian population.

Whereas Vicetto bases his history primarily on the geographical and historical works of others, Murguía delves deeper, tracing Galician history to original sources - Irish tomes, such as the *Annals of the Four Masters* and the *Book of Invasions*, also known as the *Leabhar Gabhála*. In his discussion of the myth relating the migration of the Celts from Galicia to Ireland, Murguía admits that scholars question whether it is history or mythology (Murguía 1982: 129-30). Despite the controversy, Murguía maintains that the Celts indeed settled in Galicia and Ireland and that the Celts left from Galician shores for Ireland. In order to sustain his conclusions, Murguía intermittently inserts synopses of Ith's first sighting of Ireland from Galicia and the subsequent expedition to the distant land and defers to Irish writers, including Caemháin, to validate the event. In addition, Murguía cites the French translation of *Leabhar Gabhála*, translating the text for his reader and corroborating Caemháin's version. By referring to the French *Leabhar Gabhála*, Murguía indicates a familiarity with the Irish epic that does not depend solely on secondhand sources like Villanueva's text. In order to transform a population into a nation, Geoff Eley and Ronald Grigor Suny suggest that intellectuals "manipulate and manufacture a particular view of the past, invariably as a myth of origins which is meant to establish and legitimate the claim to cultural autonomy and eventually to political independence" (Eley and Suny 1996: 8). Thus, Murguía, by appropriating Ireland's myth of origins and assigning it importance in Galician history, validates Galicia's identity as a nation with a Celtic heritage (Figure 3).

In chronicling history, Murguía observes that tradition acts as "a powerful support" (Murguía 1980: 495). For this reason he finds it necessary to introduce his readers to the ancient Irish literature in which he considers Galician prehistory to be first recorded. By mentioning *Leabhar Gabhála* and the *Annals of the Four Masters*, Murguía reinforces his claim that another tradition, that of the Irish, certifies the Galicians' alleged Celtic lineage. The ancient Irish legends, especially *Leabhar Gabhála*, to which Murguía calls attention, legitimate the purported Celtic identity of the Galicians. In this respect, Murguía uses prehistory in the guise of Irish literature as what Eric Hobsbawm calls the "cement of group cohesion" (Hobsbawm 1993: 12). It brings the Galicians into the elite group of supposed Celtic nations and therefore associates them with the Irish. Overall, both Vicetto and Murguía contribute to the evolution of Galicia's national consciousness and establish the parameters for developing Galicia's national myth.

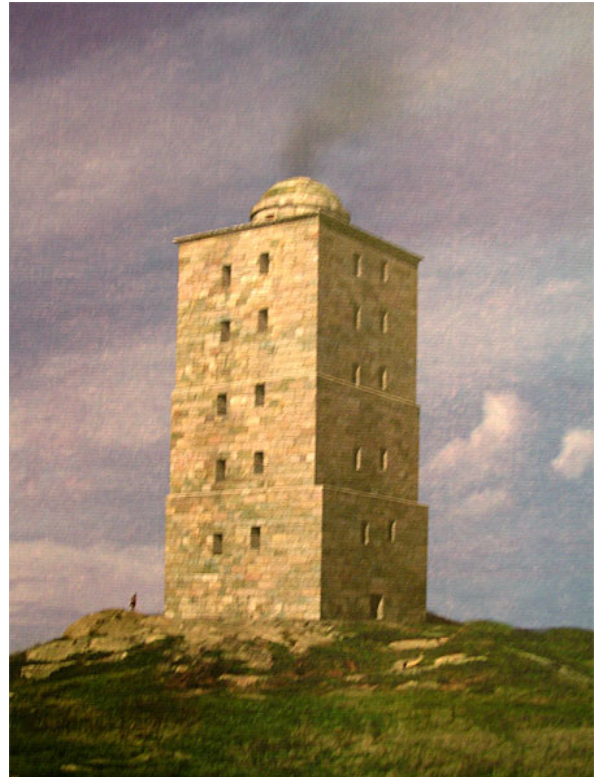


Figure 3. An image of the Tower of Hercules after being restored. It supposedly spotted the coast of Ireland from this tower (Photo: Alfredo Erias).

Reaffirming Galicia's Celtic Identity in the Twentieth Century

In the early twentieth century, a new generation of Galician intellectuals, known as the *Irmandades da Fala* and the *Xeración Nós*, sought to recover and defend Galician language and culture, while simultaneously advancing their nationalist agenda. For these groups, the Celtic connection between Galicia and Ireland persisted as a main priority. As a result, both the *Irmandades da Fala* and the *Xeración Nós* carried on the traditions of their predecessors and built upon Vicetto's and Murguía's historiographical foundations. They further developed interest in Celticism through investigations into history, archaeology, and literature. Vicente Risco (1884-1963) and Ramón Otero Pedrayo (1888-1976), who were the most active and prolific members of the *Xeración Nós*, contributed articles expounding the Celtic presence in Galicia.

Through their journalistic writings, both men sought to mold public opinions regarding Galician identity and language. Of the two, Risco produced more articles regarding the theme of Celticism in various Galician publications. On some occasions, Risco also alludes to *Leahbar Gabhála*, summarising the myth for his readers and referring to it to defend his nationalist position. In the article, "Galizia Céltiga" ("Celtic Galicia"), Risco explains the importance of Celticism to Galicia. He states,

[...] there is no serious Galician historian who does not attribute the foundation of our nation to the Celtic race. And there is no nationalist writer who does not proclaim robustly and proudly the Celtic origins of the Galician people [...]. It is necessary, therefore, to clarify the significance of Celticism in European History as well as the significance of Celticism for the Galician nation (Risco 1920a: 5).

For Risco, as for his predecessors, identifying the Galicians with the Celts allowed them to distinguish themselves from the Castilian Spanish. Based on these supposed Celtic origins and heritage, these men continued to revise and rewrite Galicia's past and redefine their identity. Furthermore, it permitted them to establish solidarity with the six other Celtic nations - Brittany, Cornwall, Ireland, the Isle of Man, Scotland, and Wales. By promoting Celticism as a defining factor in their identity, the Galician intellectuals found an alternative to the dark Mediterranean culture of Castilian Spain. Overall, Risco's writings illustrate that he accepts the ideas established by Vicetto and Murguía and continues to embrace the Celtic race as one of the distinguishing factors in Galicia's struggle for national recognition. According to Risco, Galicia's alleged Celtic identity justified its claim to be considered both a geographic and a historic nation, along with the Basque Country and Catalonia. As a consequence, Risco believed that Galicia deserved autonomy so that they could better serve their cultural and economic interests. Nevertheless, he and his colleagues did not want to separate Galicia from the rest of Spain; instead, he wanted Galicia to form part of a multinational Spanish state (Risco 1920b: 26-27).

Of the six Celtic nations, Ireland was the favorite of the *Irmandades da Fala* and the *Xeración Nós*. Both *A Nosa Terra* and *Nós* accentuated the relationship between Galicia and Ireland and followed the Irish struggle for independence with great interest. *A Nosa Terra* published a series on Irish history from the twelfth century to the present day and often updated readers on Ireland's political situation. In particular, they reported on the hunger strike of the nationalist Lord Mayor of Cork, Terence MacSwiney (1879-1920). The nationalist journal also printed letters of support which they sent to Irish delegations meeting in Madrid and elsewhere.

Nós, on the other hand, offered various essays on Ireland's culture and literature, while it occasionally commented on political events. In Risco's article, "Irlanda e Galiza" ("Ireland and Galicia"), he suggests that the connections between the two nations are due to the fact that both are located on the western coast of Europe and are also inhabited by the same race, the Celts (Risco 1921b: 18). For the *Irmandades da Fala* and the *Xeración Nós*, the parallels between Ireland and Galicia were significant. They included the colonisation and repression by a neighboring country, the precarious status of the mother language, the revival of interest in and the need for preservation of culture, the loss of natives due to emigration, a common faith in Catholicism, and struggle for independence. The Galician intellectuals identified with the Irish who, like themselves, were a peripheral European culture struggling for their own cultural and national identity. Consequently, the subject of Ireland and the Irish became an obligatory and ideologically imperative reference. For this reason, Otero Pedrayo suggests that Ireland inspired the Galician cultural and literary revival. He stresses that it was absolutely necessary for Galicians to be familiar with Irish works in order for them to develop their own neglected literature (Otero Pedrayo 1930: 176). As a consequence, the only path to increase Galicians' knowledge of Irish literature was via importation and translation.

Translating Literature in Galicia

During the 1920s and 1930s, translation slowly emerged in Galicia as part of a cultural program initiated by the *Irmandades da Fala* and the *Xeración Nós*. Risco and Otero Pedrayo, along with other companions like Alfonso Daniel Rodríguez Castelao (1886-1950), Florentino López Cuevillas (1886-1958), and Antón Villar Ponte (1881-1936), pursued their nationalist interests by founding and contributing to *A Nosa Terra* and *Nós*. These men exemplify what John Hutchinson has coined "cultural nationalists"; they were crusading academics, writers, and journalists who had established such informal groups and journals in order "to inspire a spontaneous love of community in its different members by educating them to their common heritage of splendour and suffering" (Hutchinson 1987: 16). Through their writings, both groups intended to promote their specific nationalist projects, which included raising the Galician language from its inferior position in comparison to Castilian, promoting Galicia's culture, solving Galicia's various economic problems, and gaining autonomy for Galicia.

Before the publication of the Galician translation of *Leabhar Gabhála*, translated poetry,

essays, stories, and fragments of novels appeared occasionally in *A Nosa Terra* and *Nós*. Writers from various backgrounds and cultures, including Catalan, Irish, Armenian, Portuguese, Italian, Bengali, and Indian, amongst others, were translated into Galician and printed in these journals. As is evident from this list of translated works, the contributors of Galician publications generally focused their attention on contemporaries from other small countries or "nations" that were also considered minority cultures. *A Nosa Terra* and *Nós* fomented relationships by subscribing to journals from these places, commenting on cultural and political events of interest to them, and publishing some original works of their counterparts, especially Portuguese and Catalan. As Pascale Casanova points out with respect to these relationships, the mutual interest is not only literary, but also political since "their readings of one another are so many implicit affirmations of a structural similarity between the literature and politics of small countries" (Casanova 2004: 250). Although this interest was not reciprocated by Ireland, the Galicians did not refrain from looking to her artists for inspiration.

While translations appeared periodically in both journals, the attitude of each towards translating activity varied due to different editorial policies and differing contributors' opinions. In spite of the contradictory attitudes expressed by both nationalist groups, translation eventually assumed certain responsibilities in both journals. First, it established and promoted Galician as a written language. Second, it introduced readers to the literature of other foreign cultures. Third, it enriched a national literature that was impoverished and lacking literary resources. And, finally, in most cases, it provided models for creating a literary canon and developing a national literature in Galician. It is in this context that *Leabhar Gabhlála* was translated.

Before I discuss the significance of the Irish myth for Galicia, I would like to turn my attention to considering why the Galician intellectuals decided to translate the work. The primary reason for selecting *Leabhar Gabhlála* to translate relates to the *Xeración Nós*'s intention to enhance Galicia's "literary capital". In *The World Republic of Letters*, Pascale Casanova argues that "literary capital" is composed of works that are "collected, catalogued, and declared national history and property" (Casanova 2004: 14). The main aspects of "literary capital" include age, prestige, and reputation. In other words, the value of literature depends not only on how old it is (the older, the better), but also the recognition and praise given it by professionals, including academics, publishers, writers, and an educated public as well as the prestige it earns from these opinions (Casanova 2004: 14-17). Given that *Leabhar Gabhlála* belongs to one of the richest

mythological traditions in Europe and that it was a work commented on and studied by respected Celtic scholars throughout Europe, it possessed the characteristics essential to establishing and improving Galicia's literary wealth. The second reason is due to the *Xeración Nós*'s need to fish in mythic origins for Galician identity (de Toro Santos 2000: 7). In early twentieth century Europe (and even earlier), if a culture or group wanted to be a nation, it needed a national literature with roots stretching back in history as well as roots firmly planted in the present (Lefevere 1998: 78). James Macpherson's translation of the supposed Scottish epic *Ossian*, Finnish scholars' creation of the myth *Kalevala*, and Macalister and MacNeill's translation of *Leabhar Gabhála* exemplified this need for historic national literature. As Anthony D. Smith keenly observes, "For nations need myths and pasts if they are to have a future, and such pasts cannot be forged out of nothing, nor can myths that will have resonance be fabricated" (Smith 1986: 214). Thus, when a culture lacks national literature and myths, it remedies its situation by creating and/or importing and translating foreign literature. In the case of Galicia, the translation of selected chapters from *Leabhar Gabhála* exemplifies this need and its fulfilment. By translating the chapters in which the Celts depart from Spain, or more specifically Galicia, and in which allusions to Galician monuments and geographical locations, such as the Torre de Hércules and Brigantia, appear, the Galician intellectuals found themselves to be part of another culture's history, one that excluded Castilian Spain. Furthermore, *Leabhar Gabhála* gave the members of the *Xeración Nós* something that they lacked; it portrayed them as active participants in a historic myth. For this reason, translating the Irish myth was essential to their nationalist project.

Becoming Part of History -- The Galician Translation of *Leabhar Gabhála*

Various fragments of *Leabhar Gabhála*⁵ appear in a number of Irish manuscripts and collections such as the *Book of Ballymote*, the *Book of Lecan*, and the *Book of Leinster*. However, the text to which Celtic scholars often referred and on which subsequent translations in both French and English were based was that of Michael O'Clery (1575-1645), a scribe in the Franciscan Order and a descendant of a family of scholars.⁶ In 1916, the first English translation, completed by R.A.S. Macalister (1870-1950) and Eoin MacNeill (1867-1945) was published under the title of *Leabhar Gabhála: The Book of Conquests of Ireland: The Recension of Micheál Ó Cléirigh: Part I*.⁷ It was this work on which one of the members of the *Xeración*

Nós based his translation.⁸

In 1931, *Nós* published three chapters from the Irish epic, *Leabhar Gabhála*, in issues n° 86, 88, 92 and 95. They represent *Nós*' final translated work linked to the Celtic or Irish theme.⁹ These chapters were Chapter Eleven, which tells of the occupation of the children of Mil; Chapter Twelve, which relates the journeys of the grandson of Breoghan, Golamh, later called Mil of Spain; and Chapter Thirteen, which describes the taking of Spain and Ireland by Mil's sons. An introductory article in volume 86 entitled "A historia d'El-Rei Breogán e dos fillos de Mil, asegún o Leabhar Gabhala" precedes the translated chapters. Neither the article nor the translation has a known author (Anon. 1931).

The three chapters selected by *Nós* narrate the adventures of Breoghan and Mil and their ancestors in Scythia, Egypt, Spain, and Ireland. In comparison to the other chapters, which focus on the emigrations to Ireland and the various groups' adventures there, Chapters Eleven, Twelve, and Thirteen appealed to the translator due to their narration of events in Spain and Ireland and the key references to Spain, particularly Brigantia and Breoghan's Tower. Such geographical citations corroborate Vicetto's and Murguía's claims that the Celts settled in Galicia before emigrating and conquering Ireland and locate the text within the Galician culture. Furthermore, the appearances of three well-known Galician literary and mythical figures - Breoghan, the Celtic warrior who assumed control of Spain, Mil, Breoghan's grandson and the Celtic hero who returned from his travels to reclaim Spain, and Ith, the elder (Breoghan's son and Mil's uncle) who espied Ireland from Breoghan's Tower - added to the epic's charm for the *Xeración Nós* and their target readership (Figures 4a, b).

The article preceding the first instalment of the translated *Leabhar Gabhála* functions as the reader's introduction to the ancient Irish epic. Yet it does not inform the reader of the epic's background and the general plot before Chapter XI. As I discussed earlier with respect to Vicetto and Murguía, these two historians introduced the Irish epic to Galicia and substantially discussed it. Given that *Leabhar Gabhála* appears in *Nós*, a journal circulated among an educated elite, it is probable that the writer assumes his audience's familiarity with Vicetto's and Murguía's works, expecting them to know *Leabhar Gabhála*'s background. As regards the plot, the invasions of Ireland by Cesair, Partholon, Neimhedh, Fir Bolg, and Tuatha Dé Danann involved groups that neither passed through nor settled in Galicia and thus could not be identified as ancestors of the Galicians. From the translator's nationalist perspective, those ten chapters did not represent



Figures 4a, b. The completely restored Tower of Hercules is an important monument in the city of A Coruña, Galicia (Photos: TURGALICIA).

Galicia's past and thus could not legitimate Galicia's ancestry.

Instead of introducing the epic in his own words, the writer defers to previously published materials on history and literature written in Castilian Spanish, German, and English.¹⁰ He compiles quotes from these works and translates them, offering the reader few comments of his own. He begins by pointing out that P. Alvarez Sotelo, a professor at the Colegio de Irlandeses de Santiago, was the first Galician historian to refer to the Irish legend according to Murguía. Then he continues by citing statements about *Leabhar Gabhála* made by Murguía, Rudolf Thurneysen,¹¹ a German professor whom he identifies as "one of the most authoritative Celtic scholars of our times", and Douglas Hyde, a noted Irish academic and cultural revivalist whom he lauds as "the distinguished Irish professor" (Anon. 1931: 23). Such references suggest that the author wanted not only to demonstrate the literary and cultural value of the text, but also to justify the inclusion of the translated text in the journal. By mentioning Murguía, the writer invites the reader to recall the significance of the Irish epic for Murguía's account of prehistory, especially his emphasis on race and identity. By deferring to scholars like Thurneysen and Hyde, he heavily relies upon the authority and expertise of the European intellectual community, particularly those recognised as pre-eminent Celtic scholars. Yet the writer simultaneously

manipulates their work, especially that of Hyde, extracting and translating a citation that praises the myth as "the most interesting of all" (Hyde 1967: 281) and avoids undermining either the epic's historical content or its account of the Celts' origins. The writer ignores the fact that in the Irish scholar's seminal text *A Literary History of Ireland: From Earliest Times to the Present*, Hyde not only questions the objectivity of early Irish annals and epics, but also rejects the idea that the Milesians traveled from Spain, or Galicia, to Ireland (Hyde 1967: 38-43).¹² Considering the writer's manipulation of Hyde, it is not surprising that he excludes any reference to H. D'Arbois de Jubainville, another revered Celtic scholar often cited in *Nós*, whose work, *Le cycle mythologique irlandais et la mythologie celtique*, contends that Ith and his comrades did not depart from Spain (D'Arbois de Jubainville 1903: 130).¹³ In the writer's careful selection of references he thus prevents his readers from calling into question either Vicetto's and Murguía's histories or the epic itself. More importantly he protects the Celtic ancestry which had become so integral in defining Galician national identity.

The writer also implies that the influence of *Leabhar Gabhála* throughout Europe and the studies dedicated to it, as evidenced by others' research, represent a scholarly endeavour in which *Nós* should participate. For the writer, the "considerable importance" of *Leabhar Gabhála* for the Galicians justifies its publication (Anon. 1931: 23). The text's importance is attributed to the belief that it locates the Galicians in Celtic history and establishes an ancestral connection between the Irish and the Galicians. In doing so, the text, as I noted earlier, incorporates the Galicians into the Celtic, and even wider Atlantic, community, while further attempting to differentiate and distance them from the Castilian Spanish and Mediterranean cultural context. From this introductory article, we can conclude that the anonymous translator intends not only to convince his audience of the translated chapters' relevance to Galician culture but also to incorporate this historic myth into Galician literature.

As mentioned before, the Galician version is based on Macalister and MacNeill's English translation. According to the translator, he tried to be "as literal as possible" in relation to his source text (Anon. 1931: 23). As a result, the Galician version is not very fluent and is often complex and unidiomatic. In addition, it contains numerous omissions as well as mistranslations. Overall, the problems with fluency and the losses or mistranslation of words and phrases are probably due to the translator's limited knowledge of English. Although the Galician *Leabhar Gabhála* is far from being accurate and perfect as a translation, we cannot overlook or

underestimate its value. For the Galician intelligentsia, its introduction into Galician letters provided a long-needed foundational myth in which their ancestors played a fundamental role in the founding of Ireland. For them, this detail was of the utmost importance in distinguishing the Galicians from the rest of the Iberian Peninsula. After all, the purpose of the translation was to recover and document the glorious past of Galicia's alleged ancestors and to defend the histories written by Vereá Aguiar, Vicetto, and Murguía. In addition, the legend provided them a form of literary capital and prestige that they had not possessed before.

The Galician reaction to *Leabhar Gabhála* was muted. Following its translation in *Nós*, references to the legend, either implicitly or explicitly, were minimal. Ramón Cabanillas' "O Relembro do Clan", a poem praising Breoghan and his descendants, appears between the second and third instalments of the translation (1931: 97). Castelao (1944) and Otero Pedrayo (1932) allude to the myth in books published after 1931 in order to uphold the notion of a Celtic race as well as to maintain a bond between the Irish and the Galicians. However, the small readership of the journal and the changing political climate undoubtedly affected the translation's dissemination to Galician non-elites. Unfortunately, it appears to have been overlooked by various critics and, until recently, lost amongst the prolific writings of the *Xeración Nós*.

Since the mid-nineteenth century, Galician intellectuals have ransacked their past, so as to narrate their present and future. Like their contemporaries in Brittany, Ireland, Scotland, and Wales, these men depended greatly on prehistory to establish their specific cultural identity and (re)write their nations. While Vicetto and Murguía were responsible for (re)introducing the Celts into Galician history, Risco, Otero Pedrayo, and the rest of the *Xeración Nós* supported and promoted their versions of history via their various literary and cultural activities. The best example of their efforts to illustrate their Celtic identity was the translation of chapters from *Leabhar Gabhála* and its inclusion in Galicia's literary repertoire.

Whether or not *Leabhar Gabhála* is mythological or historical was irrelevant to the Galician intellectuals of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. What matters is the fact that for these men of the *Rexurdimento* and the *Xeración Nós* an ancient text ascribed the founding of Ireland to Celtic people from Galicia and proposed a different version of history for Galicia. Through *Leabhar Gabhála*, *Nós* re-classified Galicians, including them among the emerging Celtic nations. The text was emblematic of their "mythomoteur". Like Macpherson's *Ossian*, which engendered a more favorable image of the Scots, *Leabhar Gabhála* offered a new

and nobler image of the Galicians; they were heroes and founders of the Celtic race. The *Xeración Nós* selected the final three chapters from *Leabhar Gabhála* in order to support their beliefs on race and to defend their rights as a nation distinct from Spain. By publishing these chapters of *Leabhar Gabhála*, the *Xeración Nós* translated themselves into Celtic history and mythology.

The fascination with medieval Irish and Celtic literature and various other legends continues in contemporary Galician literature. Some writers, particularly novelists, have followed in the steps of their countrymen by borrowing *topoi* from supposed Celtic nations to create a Galician literature rich with mythological icons. In addition to the literary creations of past and present authors, publishers have assumed the duty of reprinting and recovering forgotten translations from the 1920s and 1930s in order to remind today's generations of their literary capital. The latest edition of *Leabhar Gabhála*, which was published without any corrections in 2000, illustrates that even today, in Galician letters, there is still a need to go back to the past and salvage history in order to invent the nation and in the present day.

Endnotes

¹ Vicente Risco, "Irlanda e Galiza", *Nós*, 8 (1921), 18-20 (p. 20).

² During the 1920s and 1930s, the two most important cultural and political journals in Galicia, *Nós* and *A Nosa Terra*, offered translations of numerous foreign authors, including, but not limited to, the Irish writers, Terence MacSwiney, W.B. Yeats, and James Joyce; the French writers, Phileas Lebesgue and Georges Chennevière; and the Armenian poet, Hrand Nazariantz. *A Nosa Terra* only offered one translation of Yeats's work, which was the short story "An Enduring Heart". *Nós* published and translated three poems by Yeats ("To an Isle in the Water", "A Rose Tree", and "The Scholars") as well as his short story, "Our Lady of the Hills" and his play, "Cathleen ni Houlihan". *Nós* also published fragments of MacSwiney's poetry after the Irish nationalist's death. The most important translation was Otero Pedrayo's Galician translation of fragments from Joyce's *Ulysses*, which has been considered the first translation of the Irish writer in Spain. Given that the Galician intellectuals believed that Ireland and Galicia shared a common ethnic bond, they considered Ireland a model for their literary and nationalist projects.

³ Villanueva's text, which was written in Latin, appears to have been commissioned by the Royal Irish Academy, to which he dedicates this work.

⁴ With regard to Nennius's text, which was written in the time of Charlemagne, Hyde explains, "[His] accounts make the Irish come from Spain, the first being that three sons of a certain Miles of Spain landed in Ireland from Spain at the third attempt. According to what the Irish told him they reached Ireland from Spain 1,002 years after flying from Egypt" (Hyde 1967: 18).

⁵ A.G. van Hamel provides an in-depth explanation and comparison of the various manuscripts in which the invasions of Ireland are related. See A.G. van Hamel, "On Lebor Gabala", *Zeitschrift für Celtische Philologie* X (1915), pp. 97-197.

⁶ According to O'Curry, O'Clery attached a list of works from which he and his assistants made their compilation. O'Curry states, "They were the following: - The Book of *Bailé ui Mhaoilchonairé* or Bally Mulconroy, which had been copied by Maurice O'Maelchonairé, or O'Mulconroy (who died in 1543), out of the *Leabhar na h-Uidhre*, which had been written at *Cluain Mic Nois* (Clonmacnois), in the time of Saint Ciarán; the Book of *Baile ui Chleirigh*, or Bally Clery, which was written in the time of *Maelsechlainn Mór*, or Malachy the Great, son of *Domhnall*, monarch of Erin (who began his reign A.D. 979); the Book of *Muintir Duibhghenainn*, or of the O'Duigenans of *Seanchuach* in *Tir Oililla*, or Tirerrill, in the county of Sligo, and which was called the *Leabhar Ghlinn dá Locha*, or Book of Glenndaloch; and *Leabhar na h-Uachongbhala*, or the Book of the Uachongbhail; with many other histories, or historical books besides" (O'Curry 1861: 21-22).

⁷ Less than twenty years later, in 1932, Macalister alone revised the translation and re-edited it by inserting excluded chapters from the 1916 English text and including a detailed introduction explaining manuscripts used in the new translation and extensive footnotes describing the textual differences. This second English translation was *Lebor Gabhála Éirenn: The Book of the Taking of Ireland: Parts 1 and 2*.

⁸ Some Galician writers have suggested that Ramón Otero Pedrayo translated the Irish myth, while others have argued that it was Vicente Risco. After studying the writing styles, and especially the orthography, of these two writers and others of the *Xeración Nós*, I have concluded that it was most likely Risco who was responsible for the Galician version. See Kerry Ann McKevitt, "A traducción dos galegos á historia celta. A presenza de *Leabhar Gabhála*", *Anuario de estudios literarios galegos* (2001), pp. 153-67.

⁹ It is interesting to point out that most contemporary scholars of Galician translation projects, with the exceptions of Antonio Raúl de Toro Santos and Beatriz Real Pérez, have overlooked the presence of *Leabhar Gabhála* as a translated text in *Nós*.

¹⁰ The writer cites Murguía's Castilian text, *Historia de Galicia*, Thurneysen's *Die irische Helden- und Königsage bis zum siebzehnten Jahrhundert*, and Hyde's *A Literary History of Ireland, from Earliest Times to the Present Day*. This range suggests the writer's familiarity with and possible near or full fluency in German and English.

¹¹ Thurneysen published one of the first scholarly works on *Leabhar Gabhála* in 1913. For his analysis of *Leabhar Gabhála*, see Rudolf Thurneysen, *Zu irischen Handschriften und Literaturdenkmälern* (Berlin: Weidman, 1913).

¹² With regard to the Milesians' journey from Galicia to Ireland, Hyde writes, "[The Irish Gae's] own account of himself is that his ancestors, the Milesians, or children of Miledh [the Champion of Spain], came to Ireland from Spain about the year 1000 B.C., and dispossessed the Tuatha De Danann who had come from the north of Europe, as these had previously dispossessed their kinsmen the Firbolg, who had arrived from Greece. Such a suggestion, however, despite the continuity and volume of Irish tradition which has always supported it, appears open to more than one rationalistic objection, the chiefest being that the voyage from Spain to Ireland would be one of some six hundred miles, hardly to be attempted by the early Irish barks composed of wickerwork covered with hides, fragile crafts which could hardly hope to live through the rough waters of the Bay of Biscay and the Atlantic on a voyage from Spain, or through the Mediterranean and the Atlantic on a voyage from Greece" (Hyde 1967: 17-18).

As for this journey, Manuel Alberro has informed me that it actually was feasible. During a period of approximately 3000 years, *curraghs* (skin boats) travelled from Scotland and along the coasts of Wales, Cornwall, Ireland, and Brittany to Galicia. For more information, see Manuel Alberro, "Celtic Galicia? Ancient connections, and similitudes in the traditions and folklore of the Cornish peninsula and Galicia in Spain", *Cornish Studies* 9 (2001): 13-44.

Hyde also remarks that the term "Spain" may have been used loosely and may not have referred to a particular country, but a land beyond Ireland (Hyde 1967: 19).

¹³ D'Arbois de Jubainville further suggests, "The word Spain in this text is a learned translation of the Irish words *mag mor*, 'great plain'; *trag mar*, 'great strand'; *mag meld*, 'pleasant plain,' by which the Irish pagans designated the Land of the Dead, the place whence the living originally came, and their final abode. For these mythological expressions, which testify to the beliefs held in the most primitive ages, Christian euhemerism substituted the name of Spain. The legend of Tuan Mac Cairill leaves no room for doubt on this point: 'The number of Nemed's company increased until there were four thousand and thirty men of them and four thousand and thirty women. Then they all died'. They all died: that is what an ancient redaction, now lost, rendered as: 'They set sail for the Great Plain, for the Great Strand, or the Pleasant Plain,' a formula in which Nennius sees indications of a return into Spain" (D'Arbois de Jubainville 1903: 48).

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